

EXHIBIT

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FEATURED

'Confusion and chaos': Executive orders sow confusion for Head Start, other nonprofits

By Bob Audette Vermont News & Media
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U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., visited Brattleboro Town School District's Early Education Services and Red Clover Commons on Jan. 26, 2018.

Reformer file photo

BRATTLEBORO — Head Start programs in Brattleboro, Bennington, Chester and Springfield were briefly locked out of the federal payment management system after Pres. Donald Trump issued an executive order freezing all federal loans and grants.

"Confusion and chaos seem to be the point of these executive orders," said Josh Davis, executive director of Southeast Vermont Community Action, which manages Head Start programs for 50 children in Windsor County.

"We are planning for continued confusion and threats," said Deb Gass, executive director of Windham Southeast Supervisory Union's Early Education Services, which provides Head Start and Early Head Start to children in 128 families. "We want to have a back-up plan in case there are any other interruptions."



Rebecca Bishop Ware, the director of Early Education Childhood Services in Bennington, said they did not experience an actual disruption in federal funding this week, due to the timing of receiving their federal grant funds.

"There was a high level of concern expressed from many stakeholders," she said. "Staff was concerned about the stability of their jobs, and the negative impacts on their own families. I heard from many enrolled family members who expressed concern about needing to find a new childcare provider with little or no notice, in a community where childcare, particularly for infants and toddlers is still a need, just so that they could go to work."

According to a memo issued by the Office of Management and Budget, the suspension was to go into effect on Tuesday, but early that day, a federal judge issued an injunction after a number of states and nonprofits filed lawsuits.

The executive order called a halt to funding to all relevant agency activities including, "DEI, woke gender ideology, and the green new deal."

As a result of the court order, the Trump administration temporarily rescinded the memo on freezing federal disbursements.

"The pause gives us time to assess potential implications and better understand what this administration is hoping to achieve," said Davis, though the past few days have been "really chaotic."

Head Start is the only program SEVCA receives funding for directly from the federal government. The rest of the programs are funded through federal funds funneled through the state, a mix of federal and state funds and state funds.

SEVCA offers programs related to financial literacy, weatherization, heating fuel assistance, and help applying for state and federal benefits such as food assistance.

"These are critical programs that are helping people stretch their dollars," said Davis.

When Davis logged into the payment portal on Tuesday morning, he was locked out. Gass said the same.

"This is a chaotic attempt at policy," said Davis. "There's no guidance, and no detailed information. It creates a whole host of fears among our staff, clients and parents. The fear that it caused was reckless."

"We don't have a whole heck of a lot in reserves," he said.

"We were a little tense," said Gass, who said the uncertainty of what funds might get withheld continues.

"There are a lot of other supports that are provided to Head Start," she said, such as technical assistance and training, professional development, and consulting. "We are still unsure about whether the funding for those services has been placed on pause."



Gass had nothing but criticism for the authors of these vague executive orders.

"The folks who are doing the research are uneducated about all of this," she said.

Head Start in Brattleboro also offers parent support services.

"If we were to lose these federal funds, we have 62 employees who would lose their jobs," she said.

Jenny Samuelson, secretary of the Vermont Agency of Human Services, issued a memo earlier this week, stating the agency "will continue to operate as usual including making payments for personal services, contracts, goods, and subrecipient grants."

"We know this is alarming," wrote Samuelson. "Our work remains critically important for the people of Vermont who rely on us, so let us focus on what we can do right now. This includes continuing to support our community partners and co-workers who may be struggling."

MaryAnn Morris, the executive director of The Collaborative in Londonderry, with a mission of empowering "healthy youth, families, and communities," said the organization relies on federal funds, but is not solely funded through them.

"We know we can be nimble and work together through all kinds of challenges and this situation will be no different for our team," she said. "And we know if federal funding is stopped completely we will have to shift work and it could mean changes to programs and staff. Right now, it is too early to panic or get lost in this news. We are staying the course and staying as informed as possible."

Morris also stressed that non-profit organizations such as The Collaborative are part of the state's economic engine.

"They generate billions of dollars in revenue, create thousands of jobs, and add millions in tax revenue," she said. "Disrupting the flow of federal grant funding will have far-reaching consequences, impacting not only the individuals and communities we serve but also Vermont's overall economic well-being."

Eric Covey, director of communications, policy and regulatory affairs for VNA & Hospice of the Southwest Region, said that while they don't anticipate any impact due to threatened fund freezes, there is a significant threat of Medicare cuts and migration to Medicare Advantage plans that often pay at very low rates that could limit access to services, and that's not counting the workforce crisis and not having enough people to provide the services.



"At this time we need state and federal leaders to invest in home-based care," Covey said. "Any efforts to cut or eliminate funding will only threaten access to the critical care our Vermont communities depend on."

Vermont News & Media's Cherise Forbes and Timothy Wassberg contributed to this report.

Bob Audette can be contacted at raudette@reformer.com.

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